



Learning the unorthodox way; The NATURAL way

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I strongly believe that all children are born in to this world with a specific profile, just like a very specific colour of the vast visible range of colours we see. One that is unique and yet a part of a infinite universe, which is perhaps another way of expressing theory of Multiple Intelligence. This was a concept advanced by the developmental psychologist Howard Gardner about 40 years ago.

Any adult would only know too well, keeping in mind that they themselves were children once, that no two children that undergo the same experience will tell you the same thing about that experience, not even if they are identical twins. Yet, we adults bestow upon them a set of guidelines in a manual, structure

them and mold them the way WE want them molded, expecting them to perform in full gear at the end of thirteen years. Little do we realise that in that process we often take away the need, the desire, and the longing the child has, to LEARN. So, we end up producing adults who will likely not know where their passion lies, leading to unhappy and unfulfilled lives.

Because we are all familiar with the formal education system in Sri Lanka, which we have experienced as children, as parents or as educators, I will not describe it here. Instead, I want to focus on sharing my experiences of nearly 14 years of homeschooling our three children, now 13, 12, and 5 years old. Why we chose to homeschool, about

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'unschooling', and why we allowed our children to learn from "real world" experiences rather than a fixed syllabus. In brief, this article is about how two home-based working parents took up the responsibility of educating their kids the unorthodox way, the natural way.

It is a terrible misconception in our society to feel that unless forced, children will NOT learn. The inborn profile of each child, in aptitude and interest, is unique. But only too often, we tend to ignore that every child has an innate DESIRE to learn. Give them the right environment, one that has NO time limits, no compulsion, no testing, and finally and most importantly, with no autocracy, children will learn as naturally as a fish learning to swim.



Play becomes an integral part of their lifestyles. Studies have proved over and over again that children are experts in play. It is through play that they learn best. What do I mean by 'play'? These are activities that are child-driven and open-ended, planned entirely by the children themselves. Because play

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never feels like work or an obligation, learning happens spontaneously. We have always enjoyed watching them making a mess of themselves, maybe just rubbing paint or throwing water around. Often, it's this chaos or the aftermath of play, that parents/adults fear the most. Adults therefore end up controlling play to an extent that kids do not get any space to make choices and to invent rules for themselves, or decide how to interact with each other productively and fairly.

Decision-making is an important life skill that can be mastered through open-ended and unstructured play. As children grow, play evolves in ways that adapt to their needs. Accommodating these changes as and when the turning takes place is the adult's role in child-driven play activities, building their confidence at all times. However, in many early child development institutions in Sri Lanka, often under the slogan of "play based learning", you will see colourful toys on display, and adults interfering and commanding children to perform a given task. Expecting a fixed response from the child is certainly NOT what true "play based learning" ought to be.

Through 'unschooling', or undoing the practices of a formal school, with no structured curriculum, many parents fear that their children will not learn or will end up watching TV, or with smart devices, playing games all day. School

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seems normal because we see it everywhere and it is accepted by almost everyone. What we fail to understand is that these practices were in fact “factory modeled” at a time where child slavery was the norm in the western world, nearly a century back.



Through unschooling we have seen our children learn in ways that suits them best, meaningfully, with a purpose, and most importantly, when the time is right. We refer to this as their “readiness”. “Readiness” is what’s most important for any child to learn any concept. Educationally, this is an important measurable tool, far better than any standardized test in a structured environment. All you need is to understand the psychology of children. Unfortunately, though in structured schools, where children are segregated based on biological age, religion, language and gender, forced to learn concepts limited by time, learning becomes an unhappy ritual for children. Especially in the Sri Lankan context, formal schools have over the years succeeded in latching on to worst

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practices in pedagogical learning, leaving aside many healthy practices. If kids learn when they are ready, they spontaneously retain much more. Also, what’s amazing is that they most naturally “scaffold” to the next level, without us ever needing to interfere with them to move to the next level. This inculcates self-learning, which is yet another important life skill they must nurture, in order to discover their passion in life.

Nature Based Learning

In our own case, nature-based learning has been our preferred mode of learning experiences. This is prime among the healthy approaches I mentioned above. Apart from letting our children explore the outside world, Nature (at least to me) offers one of the best holistic learning experiences to a child, only if we know how to give the child the freedom to make discoveries. We have always felt that in schools, children are being taken literally out of a rich environment, namely “the outdoors”, confined to an artificial set-up within classrooms, and taught the same things except in a meaningless manner. Neither a textbook nor an indoor experience can ever replace outdoor experiences children have. And the infinite appreciation of nature develop only blossoms further as they grow to become adults.

We’ve let our children explore the outside world, let them feel for

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themselves, and at the same time encouraged them to notice changes that happen around them. Because we have never discouraged them from questioning us all the time, these outdoor explorations often end up being wonderful experiences for all of us. For questions that we parents might not know answers, we guide them on how to research and find answers from sources other than the two of us.



Sri Lanka is currently facing an economic crisis like never before. This has severely affected every aspect of the life of the nation in all possible disciplines. If you look back in time at

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other nations where revolutions have taken place, they have often twisted their fate to comeback far better. In any of these cases, success came from restructuring their education systems, be it the aftermath of the WW-II, in Germany, or the first Russian satellite to orbit Earth, which changed the system of education in America. It is time that we brought about a radical change to the current, literally non-functioning formal education system in Sri Lanka.

Education needs to be centered on children, not on parents and teachers. We need to identify and adopt best practices so that children will learn more naturally and joyfully, the way they are meant to be learning, without repetitive testing and standardizing.

Nethu Wickramasinghe, is a homeschooling mother of three children, based in Sri Lanka. She has over a decade of experience in alternative teaching strategies, and is the founder principal of **Education Without Boundaries (EWB)**. A writer (scientific and popular science), and naturalist, working as a researcher in molecular biology, her passion is to simplify and accurately disseminate science to young minds using explorative modern techniques without boundaries, and instill the desire of lifelong learning in them.